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Forum

Ellul on Communications Technology

Ellul On The Need For Symbolism

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The more I have studied Ellul's writings, the more impressed I have become with the central role "communication" plays in his thought. Since my field of study is communication technologies, I initially was drawn to Ellul because of his insistence that the technological system (*la technique*) is dominating our era. There was, as well, an initial attraction because of the number of examples he draws from the media. But I have come to see that Ellul's concern with communication is at a far more important level: We can hope for the survival of what is human only if we engage in the creation of symbols which allow us to retain mastery in a technological environment. The purpose of this essay is to outline for Ellul scholars the central place our need to symbolize plays in Ellul's thought.

Ellul's Terminology

In his writings about communication, Ellul makes a point of insisting he does not take a specialist's viewpoint on the topic. Temple says that while this "outsider's" orientation contributes to an imprecision in his terminology, its strength is in providing a "common sense" approach.

Perhaps he is not always fair to leaders in the linguistic sciences, but (as in all his other books) he is neither a philosopher nor a literary critic. He writes as social commentator (and as an "ordinary" layman) observing the effects of changes in the role of language and also as a voice for common sense on behalf of all of us who feel that somehow the substance of language has been replaced by a trick with smoke and mirror images.¹

It is this orientation which leads Ellul to argue: "Defining language by talking about codes, signifiers, the syntagma, semiotics, and semiology does not solve the problem" of language we face today. Always we must come back to simple facts, common sense, and commonplaces as our starting point.² He is concerned that an approach to language which is too "scientific" can rob it of its symbolic function.

Human language cannot be reduced strictly to a transmission of information. Communication/information theory is extremely impoverished for it reduces language to a reality, doubtless scientifically knowable, but one that excludes the principal aspect of the phenomenon. The symbolization of society is effected through language and, since the beginning, this process has considered the social relationship as not merely the immediate contact of human being to human being, but as a *mediated* relationship. This mediation creates a symbolic space for the obligatory interpretation of relationships. It provides a "windbreak" between man and man and causes brutality to be excluded so that coexistence becomes possible. Man cannot subsist on mere physical contact alone; he must symbolize it and situate it in a symbolic universe.³

The risk comes from our ability to "separate the code from the language, the information from the spoken words, or reduce information to bytes."⁴ This technical approach to language leads to a reductionism which eliminates "from human language everything that goes beyond visual information, everything that is inaccessible to the code. The result would be not just an amputation, which is

the traditional reductionist method of all the sciences, but a surgical excision of language's very heart."⁵ As a result, Ellul is opposed to any approach which limits language's "breadth of meaning, ambiguity, and variation in interpretation."⁶ Most importantly for Ellul, the uncertainty inherent in our symbols provides us with individual freedom as we seek for truth and coherence.

Symbolization as a Basic Human Need

Ellul calls human symbol-making "one of the most basic functions of life."⁷ He believes that our creation in the image of the God-who-speaks is at the base of our symbolizing and thus serves as an important part of what distinguishes us from the rest of creation.⁸ It is, he says, "the specific characteristic of *Homo sapiens* . . ." But, besides defining man, this symbol-making function is also "the key to his success."⁹ The "success" to which Ellul refers is humankind's ability to survive in its milieu or environment by gaining mastery over it through symbolization.¹⁰

Ellul links milieu and symbolization quite closely, noting that "symbolization is always effected in relation to the environment in which man lives, and as a function of the environment."¹¹ Ellul points out that it is only within "the environment [that] we have occasion to exercise one of the most basic functions of life, that is, symbolism. The environment gives us the chance to create symbols, and here are riches that spur us to development."¹² It is through this process of a sense-making ordering of the world that "man [is able] to engage himself in a certain mastery of nature."¹³

Mastery over our environment is made possible by this symbolic function as it provides humans "domination through distance and differentiation."¹⁴ On the first point, domination through distance, Ellul argues that, "for there to be symbolization at all, the symbol-creator must be outside what he is symbolizing; there must be some distance between the symbolizer and the symbolized."¹⁵ On the second, domination through differentiation, distinctions for Ellul result from our designation of names, because the "word is creator in that it names things, thus specifying them by differentiating them."¹⁶ This gives us mastery over what we name as we attach importance, meaning, and place to it. "To name someone or something," he says, "is to show one's superiority over him or it."¹⁷ As an example, Ellul refers to the Genesis account, where "Adam is confirmed as the head of creation when God brings all the animals to him so that he can give each one a name (Gen. 2:19)."¹⁸ Thus, being comes through naming.

The Genesis passage that establishes creation on the basis of separation contains the germ of the most modern ideas about language: it tells us that difference both establishes the word and proceeds from it. The word bestows being on each reality, attributing truth to it; it gives dynamism to reality and prescribes a fixed trajectory for it. In this way the word disentangles confusion and nonbeing.¹⁹

Our name-making is driven by our need for coherence. The creative process allows us to order our environment through sym-

bols. "From the moment man proceeds to the denomination of things," Ellul writes, "he has made them enter his universe and they belong to a coherent ensemble. They belong to man by virtue of the name he has bestowed on them. He has not only put his mark on things, he has also made them [*sic*] exist."²⁰ This transformation comes as one symbolizes, making "his natural, objective reality into a special universe that he constitutes from within himself,"²¹ and resulting in the "creation of a universe different from the one in which he is situated, but fully a part of his real milieu."²²

The whole process of symbol-making is interpretive, making signs "enter into a coherent explanatory ensemble (even if only fictively explanatory) of which man stands as master."²³ Ellul says the coherence is gained as one selects which elements to feature or mask, in the same way as an artist interprets reality.

[Symbolization] is not like a photographic reproduction, which would serve no function: the painter makes choices of which characteristics of reality to retain, highlighting some and making them carriers of meaning, while others he marks for obliteration, pushing them into the shadows or making them disappear altogether. . . . There is a transformation into a new universe, which renders explicit and in terms of relationship, that which is implicit and without apparent relationship.²⁴

Ellul places supreme importance on this interpretive process which provides structure for our world because it is through "the symbolic transformation of reality" that one "creates the possibility of acquiring a non-material grasp on reality, without which he would be completely unprovided for."²⁵

Since the creation of symbols is rooted in the environment or milieu in which we find ourselves, problems arise during a time of transition. As we have moved into the environment of *la technique*, our use of symbols has become outdated. "[S]ince thinking is slow to move and verbal forms are always a step behind reality, the older environment serves as an ideological reference for those who have been plunged into the new one."²⁶ Importantly for Ellul, as we live during a time of transition, this tendency toward anachronistic symbolization leads to "enormous errors of judgment" which result in a failure to identify properly the challenge of *la technique*.²⁷

Self-Symbolization of *la technique*

As we attempt to make sense of our new technological environment, Ellul argues that *la technique* itself provides coherence through its self-symbolization.²⁸ Ellul contends that "technology is itself productive of symbols and becomes by itself its own symbol. . . . Technology is not only an environment, nor merely an ensemble of means and instruments; it is itself a symbolic universe. It furnishes itself with its own symbols."²⁹ As a result, "[n]ow it is technology which has taken over and which produces for man the coherent symbols that are attributable to the technological universe."³⁰

Through the images produced by *la technique* some of our needs seem to be met. But Ellul argues that we have experienced "a complete inversion of the scale of needs."³¹ As a result, the needs which are met are "artificial needs, which are unimportant, not in the least essential to man, but which become irrepressible, exigent, imperious, the only ones to be taken seriously in the long run. . . ."³²

Images help us make up for the loss of the natural environment, a loss to which we have never quite reconciled ourselves. Without contact with the reality of the natural environment "we develop an extremely deep need for another reality." This need is met though "[t]he image is mirage [which] reconciles contradictions, makes absent nature present and real again. . . . Images counterbalance all the abstractions. And they restore to us at last a reality in which we can live: the reality of the world of images."³³ But this "world imagined by the media" is a "perfectly artificial world, recomposed

by the images and sounds of these media. Consequently," Ellul says, "there is no place for symbolization to occur."³⁴

The end result is that we cannot gain mastery over our technological environment because the only experience we accept as "real" is itself the result of *la technique*'s self-symbolization. "[T]he images of a technical society only seem to be symbolizing by reflecting a reality that is itself only a reflection." Thus, instead of providing distance and differentiation, this self-symbolization "has the effect of integrating, adapting, and assimilating man to technique."³⁵ This integration is encouraged by our distraction from the reality of the system. "Images are essential if I am to avoid seeing the day-to-day reality I live in. They glitter continuously around me, allowing me to live in a sort of image-oriented fantasy."³⁶ Ellul draws a distinction between images as "a substitute reality" and the word, which "obliges me to consider reality from the point of view of truth." He writes, "Artificial images, passing themselves off for truth, obliterate and erase the reality of my life and my society."³⁷

The Need for New Symbols

Living in an environment of artificial images results in the elimination of meaning: "Language becomes, in effect, a system of signs which answer to certain archetypes, to certain uses and to certain habits, but the symbolic dimension of language is destroyed."³⁸ The "reality" of the poetic, mythic and metaphysical falls before the "reality" of the empirical. What can be "seen" by the soul is replaced by what can be seen with the eyes. The word becomes humiliated by the image. Symbol becomes sign. Language "becomes no more than a sort of organized noise," so that "a whole part of man's symbolic activity is rendered impossible. Among other things, he is capable neither of true consciousness nor of recognition."³⁹

Part of the problem is that the Enlightenment's elimination of the metaphysical makes it difficult for people in modern society to create a "symbolic universe," that is, a superordinate sense-making of our environment which is based on the ultimate. Instead, we are limited to that which can be handled "scientifically." When it comes to language, the result has been the study of signs apart from meaning; ". . . the mentality of scientism has pounced upon language," Ellul complains, "and has involved us in reducing the word to the state of an object: a scientific object."⁴⁰ The tangible, what can be seen, becomes what is "real."

I cannot observe the signified, nor the relationship of the signifier with the signified. These are "philosophical" problems. On the contrary, I can observe the emission of a phrase, its circulation, deformation, and audition. I can even make nice diagrams of this process. This shows in the first place that this attitude follows the traditional "scientific" tendency: only what can be observed and analyzed by the classical scientific method is important (or even exists, in the extreme view). Since only the communication process involving the signifier can be thus analyzed, it is the only thing that matters to us. Everything else is a metaphysical argument that serves only to confuse the scientific relationship between subject and object.⁴¹

But in excluding meaning as beyond examination (and therefore unimportant) and in concentrating "exclusively on reality and the concrete," we lose the truth which is "to be read between the lines or heard in the silent moments of discourse." While the Image limits us to "[t]ruth verifiable by science," the word "continually casts doubt on this claim."⁴²

The ultimate bankruptcy of the universe of images is out of sight for us in the environment of *la technique*. The system "presents itself as an environment so coherent and so unitary that it does not seem to have a point where man can insert anything else."⁴³ It "devalues all other mediations and man seems to have no need of symbolic mediation because he has technological mediation."⁴⁴ As a result,

"[n]ow it is technology which has taken over and which produces for man the coherent symbols that are attributable to the technological universe."⁴⁵

The problem with this new reality is that its dependence on images produces the "tendency toward the disappearance of the symbolic function."⁴⁶ Given the unity of the system, "man seems to have no need of symbolic mediation because he has technological mediation. It even appears to man that technology is more efficacious and permits him a greater domination over what threatens him and a more certain protection against danger than does the symbolic process."⁴⁷ Our ability to create symbols has been sterilized by the ease with which we can "consume" the system's images. "Just as vaccines have progressively reduced the capacity of the organism to create spontaneously natural immunities, so in the same way, man no longer creates symbols because too many are offered him at too simple a level of consumption."⁴⁸ But these images "have not elaborated a significant and meaningful symbolic universe."⁴⁹ They have "ceased to assure us of permanence; ceased to call forth a deepened consciousness and thus cannot be creators of history."⁵⁰ They ultimately fail because they cannot meet our need for a "deep" coherence.

Provided with a technological mediation which is so efficient and so complete that it becomes embraced to the exclusion of all else, we have lost sight of the human need to create our own symbols if we are to survive and grow. "Man no longer feels specifically the need to launch himself into the adventure of initial symbolic creation precisely because he sees himself surrounded by those symbols that are actually produced by the technological system."⁵¹ The easy access to the existing symbolic universe of *la technique* "sterilizes man's desire" to create one's own symbols.⁵²

Intervention Into the Cycle

The vicious circle which is suggested by Ellul's analysis reveals to us the double importance of communication in his thinking: the seemingly complete mediation of *la technique* reduces our perceived need to create symbols, and without the creation of new symbols with which we can gain mastery over our new environment, no challenge to the technological mediation is possible. Thus Ellul seeks to provide an intervention into the cycle through his demonstration of the emptiness of the needs which are being met by *la technique* and the danger resulting from our loss of awareness of our need to symbolize. Only by breaking this vicious circle are adaptation and growth possible. "So long as the evolution of the symbolic universe remains possible, the normal evolution of society is possible without crisis and within humanely acceptable bounds."⁵³ Therefore, man's "only chance to subsist in his human specificity" is "to effect a symbolization of technology" toward human ends.⁵⁴ The "univocal" mediation by technology must be replaced with symbolization which is "plurivocal, equivocal, unstable in [its] applications, and also deeply rooted in a rich and creative unconsciousness."⁵⁵ Ellul believes that we must "work to create new values, to reach a consensus on a new meaning, to create new symbols." If this is done, then it is possible that technologies can be placed in the role of servant once again. But "if society is not successful, it surely will disintegrate. In other words," he says, "it is now a time for invention . . ."⁵⁶ It is to that invention of a new communication which adequately symbolizes the elements of *la technique* that Ellul calls us.

NOTES

1. Katharine Temple, "Jacques Ellul: A Consistent Distinction," *Media Development* 35, no. 2 (1988): 21.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 1-2.
3. *Ibid.*, 210.
4. Jacques Ellul, "Preconceived Ideas About Mediated Information," in *The Media Revolution in America and in Western Europe*, eds. Everett M. Rogers and Francis Balle (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985), 103.
5. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 3.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 100.
8. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 50-51.
9. Jacques Ellul, "Symbolic Function, Technology and Society," *Journal of Social and Biological Structures* 1 (1978): 207.
10. Jacques Ellul, "An Aspect of the Role of Persuasion in a Technical Society," trans. Elena Radutsky and Charles Stern, *Et cetera* 36 (Summer 1979): 149.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 100.
13. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 208.
14. Ellul, "Role of Persuasion," 151.
15. *Ibid.*, 150.
16. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 53.
17. *Ibid.*, 52.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 53.
20. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 212.
21. *Ibid.*, 207.
22. *Ibid.*, 208.
23. *Ibid.*, 207; note deleted.
24. *Ibid.*, 207.
25. *Ibid.*, 208.
26. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 101.
27. *Ibid.*, 102.
28. Ellul, "Role of Persuasion," 151.
29. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 217.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Jacques Ellul, "The Obstacles to Communication Arising from Propaganda Habits," *The Student World* 52 (1959): 405.
32. *Ibid.*, 404.
33. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 207.
34. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 215.
35. Ellul, "Role of Persuasion," 151.
36. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 128.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 215.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 165.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 182.
43. Ellul, "Symbolic Function," 217.
44. *Ibid.*, 216.
45. *Ibid.*, 217.
46. *Ibid.*, 214.
47. *Ibid.*, 216.
48. *Ibid.*, 217.
49. *Ibid.*, 214.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, 217.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, 211.
54. *Ibid.*, 217.
55. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1980), 37.
56. Jacques Ellul, "Search for an Image," trans. Henry Darcy and Gloria and Lionel Abel, *The Humanist* 33 (Nov.-Dec. 1973): 23.